

A Remarkable Career Of a Remarkable Man

PROFESSOR WILLIAM HENRY RICHARDS' EARLY STRUGGLE WITH BITTER POVERTY

Devoted Mother's Love and Unsparing Sacrifice, With Great Men as Companions and Counsellors, Fulfill

PRESIDENT GARFIELD'S WISE PREDICTION.

The true biographer seeks to throw upon the canvas of lasting remembrance the correct outlines of an individual life, and to retouch the picture with such fine lines as will bring to view distinctive characteristics and give expression to the spirit of the subject. The first requisite for a pleasing portrait or an interesting sketch is a good subject. This is certainly offered in the character and attainments of Professor William H. Richards, whose life and work will continue to be an inspiration to many a youth who, amid adverse circumstances seeks a career of usefulness and real honor.

It is not because Frederick Douglass rose by his own inherent power to a place among the immortals, that he is the Abou Ben Adhem, whose name reads all the rest of America's self-made men, but because he did this from a lowlier starting point than all others and in spite of weights which would have crushed a less Titanic soul. It is not alone for the success which Professor Richards has won in the fields of learning and the faithfulness with which he has served humanity in the walks of peace where noblest heroes are, that we cry "Bravo" when we see him honored by all who appreciate true culture and acknowledge the peer of the leading legal instructors of the present age.

Born at Athens, Tennessee, in the very days preceding the "irrepressible conflict" his only ground of vantage over the sage of Anacostia was that he was born of free parents. "The child of the free woman is the child of promise;" but there was little chance for the fulfillment of early promise to the children of free colored people in a slave State. They had not even the protection which regard for their market value caused the least humane masters to give their human chattels.

Before the birth of her distinguished grandson, Hannah Richards, who, with her whole family, had been marked as a reward of faithful service, taken bound to a cotton plant in Alabama, and it was only by her indomitable courage and almost superhuman endurance that she effected her escape swimming streams and crossing mountains on her perilous journey back to her humble home in Tennessee. To the care and support of this brave woman was left the "Mitherless bairn," who was completely orphaned before reaching his fourth year, and, although she was then about 70 years of age, she labored energetically to keep the proverbial wolf from the door, and fought at least two battles royal with wolves in sheep's clothing, who had stolen her pet lamb and hoped to retain him by force and fraud. When her personal efforts for his rescue were met with threats of clubs and dogs and guns, she appealed to the justice-loving citizens to enable her to recover her treasure by law, and easily proved that she was an efficient guardian for him.

Partly to keep him safe and partly to keep him employed, wise Hannah Richards sent her Willie to work on a farm in summer before he was nine

years old, and every summer thereafter until he was sixteen years of age and six feet in height; his wages rising steadily from three dollars per month and board with which he began, to ten dollars, the maximum wages for a man.

So the ill wind of poverty blew to the orphan boy such blessings as are seldom found in the track of the fair winds of fortune. It blew him to the country at an age when the sons of many well-to-do parents are starting on the road to loafdom. It gave him healthful exercise amid the beauties of nature, in a mountainous region where air and water are unsurpassed in purity, and where the skies rival the skies of Sunny Italy in tints of blue and gold and amethyst. It gave him physical development to stand the coming strain when the noble mind would struggle for wider range and higher view. It gave him enough of the discipline of daily duty to prepare him for the responsibilities of any position to which an honorable American citizen may aspire.

When a small boy he learned his letters from white girls at places where his grandmother was employed. She took him with her instead of leaving him alone or in doubtful company, and was as particular in training him as if he had been a girl. He attended a Sunday school taught by a free colored man and woman and a favored slave, and there learned to spell words of two syllables. In the winter of 1864 he began going to a private school, which he continued to attend until the Freedmen's Bureau sent teachers to Athens in 1865. What if his first school room had a dirt floor? What if his first teachers used Webster's spelling-book and Noah's methods of teaching? He was eager and glad and happy to sit on a rough bench and take home some kind of script to copy, as there were no desks in the primitive school houses. Three of these Negro school houses in the town of Athens, and four others in the vicinity were destroyed by fire. One of these stood so near the little cottage of his grandmother that the same fire swept away both buildings in August, 1868.

After the Freedmen's Bureau, came the helping hand of northern philanthropy and excellent teachers, whose souls glowed with pity, and piety, and patriotism, left pleasant homes in communities where they were loved and honored, to teach the most needy and unfriended class in their own country under far different circumstances. Not only did these Christian women delight in giving instruction to the polite, docile and studious lad, but many others took an interest in one whose ideals were so high and gave such promise of becoming the scholar and polished gentleman that he is. Yardly Warner, superintendent of the Friends' Mission schools, gave him valuable assistance. Rev. James W. White, at whose home he met Bishop Gilbert Haven and other eminent philanthropists, lent him books and thus opened to him the choicest fields of literature. Rev. David M. Wilson, for fourteen years a missionary

in Syria, and who afterwards gave to Athens, Tenn., the haven of a brave and practical Christian ministry, was a true and faithful counsellor. He gave him sympathy, treated him as an equal, visited his humble home and invited him to his own house, as well as gave him the use of his splendid library. For ten years he was his Sunday-school teacher, directed his course of reading and study, gave him his first ideas of the nature of society and human rights, and instructed him in mental and moral philosophy.

As a pupil he had often been called upon to act as monitor, and frequently to hear classes recite, and he began in his seventeenth year to teach school at Mt. Harmony, Tenn., raising the standard for temperance and purity, and carrying on a vigorous crusade against the use of tobacco. He organized a debating society and strove to improve the condition of the people. An enthusiastic and successful teacher from the beginning he was employed a second year as a student-teacher at Athens and afterwards at Warner Institute, Jonesborough, he won the highest praise. He conducted school at Johnson City and at Greenville with remarkable success, continuing his studies while teaching, and occasionally reporting to the Institute for emanation and instruction. Vacation always found him with a book in his hand.

He began to take an interest in public affairs by circulating a petition memorializing Congress for the passage of Charles Sumner's Supplemental Civil Rights' Bill. As this was in the trying days of Reconstruction, a white physician who favored the measure was driven out of the town with his family and others threatened.

Young Richards early acquired a reputation in his native county as a speaker, having carried off the prize in an oratorical contest at Forest Hill in his sixteenth year, his competitors being picked scholars three or four years his seniors. His first political address, delivered in the court house at Athens in 1876, before he had reached his majority, attracted wide attention and elicited much favorable comment.

In 1878 he entered Howard University, and during his last two years there led his classes in most of the college studies, although pursuing at the same time a course in the Law Department from which he graduated as valedictorian, June 1, 1881. President Garfield, who conferred the degree upon the class, said of the valedictorian, "The country will hear from that young man." And it has often been remarked that his address on "The Genius of Popular Government" remains the best that has yet been delivered by a student of the Howard University Law School during the thirty-three years of its existence.

Having considerable political influence he was appointed to a \$1000 clerkship in the Treasury Department July 1, 1881, and promoted for efficiency to \$1,200 the following year. This appointment enabled him to pay off his debts. The only financial aid he had ever had was the loan of money from the writer of this article, which money he now returned as he had borrowed it, by installments. In 1882 he completed a post graduate course in law at the head of his class, continuing the study of Latin and also of Greek, having originally learned the latter language with out a teacher, and devoted himself for several years, under able instructors to the acquisition of the French, Italian, German and Spanish tongues.

On December 21, 1885, President Cleveland dismissed Mr. Richards from the Treasury Department for "offensive partisanship," and on January 1, 1886, he was given a school in the District Columbia, of which he remained in charge till June 15, 1886, when he returned to Tennessee, where he ministered to the only parent he had ever known in her declining years, and remained until after the close of her earthly pilgrimage.

Wherever he had taught, he was sought as a teacher. Wherever he had spoken people wanted to hear him again. In 1882 he had spoken along the line of the Southern Railroad against the repudiation of the State debt, and his speeches were so logical and persuasive, and so tempered with tact and kindness; that he won golden opinions and many friends among both races. In 1887 he ardently supported the Prohibitory Amendment through East Tennessee, and spent election day at the polls working with the temperance women. During the same year he was elected

alderman in a white liquor ward of his native town, receiving more votes than his three white competitors together, and was re-elected in 1888 by a similar majority, though he had taken an active part in the fight to close the saloons at night. He was elected Mayor pro-tem, for the year 1889 by acclamation, as many Democrats as Republicans voting for him, and so was the first Negro to serve as Mayor in a Southern white community.

Mr. Richards was admitted to the Athens bar December 5, 1887, and in the following April won distinction in the case of the State against Oscar Fifer, white, for the murder of Matt. Whiteside, colored. The Athenians say: "The Attorney General conducted the prosecution with the assistance of several distinguished lawyers, among them W. H. Richards." On the other side also was a goodly array of the best legal talent in the state. An exhaustive effort was made on both sides, and each of the attorneys made able and elaborate speeches in the case before it was submitted to the jury. The accused was sentenced to the penitentiary. Give a credit mark to Athens, Tenn., and don't forget that in the consummation of this victory for justice there was the fine, firm hand of the boy who had been left homeless on the hillside when one of the freedmen's school houses was caught in the prevailing epidemic of fire just 20 years before.

In 1888 he was elected a delegate to the Republican County, Congressional and state conventions, and on returning to Washington in 1889, he was a favorite son of Tennessee; no man ever went up to the capital with better testimonials to the essentials of a true and noble manhood. Colored men praised him for his devotion to the cause of the weak and helpless. Republicans lauded him for his able advocacy of their principles, and Democratic members of the bar said he was a good lawyer, a thorough scholar, and a perfect gentleman. All Tennesseans agreed that he was able and worthy to fill any position of responsibility and honor. He wanted a consulship on the Mediterranean, but was offered a clerkship in the Post Office Department, and later a position in the Interior Department, which he accepted January 8, 1890, serving a year and a half, being once promoted.

In 1890 he accepted the Professorship in the Law Department of Howard University, which he had declined four years before and has for the past ten years been an honored and useful member of the law faculty, being at present Professor of the Law of Evidence, International law and Personal Property, and has a law office at 420 Fifth street, n. w., Washington, D. C. He is a member of the Graduate Club, president of the Howard University Union Alumni Association, is the literary spirit of the law faculty, and at president of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association for the past two years, has done much to develop a taste for all that is best in art, in literature, and in life. J. B. N.

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